The Bible and science- conflict and compromise

*Dr D.K. Muldoon, 2017*

It is widely thought and taught that the Bible, particularly the Biblical account of creation, conflicts with the facts of science. If this is so we face the challenge of proving one or the other to be true, and by implication the other to be false. The argument is not so simple of course. Indeed, is there really a conflict at all? I deliberately refer to the *facts* of science; facts are different to theories. The facts of science are not disputed. Controlled, repeatable experiments and measurements are the essence of science- what is called empirical or operational science. Experiments or observations produce facts. How these facts are interpreted is another matter. What model or theory is proposed to explain the facts is another matter. The data or facts may be carefully considered, and opinions of others sought, but in the end the theory remains a matter of opinion. It is not uncommon for data sets to re-analysed and re-considered after the gathering of further data over time, and then interpreted by a totally different model.

Science is basically the study of the natural world. Geology is the study of rocks and biology the study of living things. Scientific study is possible because of the order and laws governing the natural world. Cultures and religions that fail to recognise such order did not progress in science. The Reformation and Puritanism saw an increased interest in science, leading to the great understanding that we have today about the universe, about living organisms, about cell structure and genetics. Scientists of the 17th century, men like Robert Boyle, Robert Hooke and Sir Isaac Newton, took history or pre-history from the Bible. They believed the Bible to be the word of God. Indeed many scientists down to the present day believe the Bible; it is not only materialists, men who reject the supernatural, who can be objective scientists.

Darwin’s theory of evolution provided a new framework or world view into which the facts of science might fit. This theory rejects the supernatural and seeks to explain the origin of life in an atheistic or Deistic manner. Although it is about origins, origins without the hand of God, it did become a whole new world view affecting individuals and societies down to the present day. The church, even the Presbyterian Church, felt intimidated by Darwin’s theory. Our question today is, why?

**Origin of the Species**

The theory of evolution was around before Darwin but it was the publication of his book, ‘Origin of the Species’ in 1859 that impacted the western world. Darwin was an astute observer of nature; he loved collecting specimens. He began theological studies but changed to being a naturalist even though he never formerly studied science. His big break came in 1831 when he was recommended to join the voyage of HMS Beagle, a five year voyage circumnavigating the globe. He took with him the recently published book of the geologist Charles Lyell in which vast geologic ages were proposed. On this voyage he observed flora and fauna very different to what he knew from England. He observed how these were adapted to their environment, yet how they were similar in many characteristics.

Darwin’s book, written some twenty years after the voyage, is subtitled, ‘by means of natural selection or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life’ because in it he proposes his theory of natural selection or the survival of the fittest. Darwin had observed how cattle breeders selected for traits to improve their herds. He proposed Nature as doing a similar thing in the natural world, so that given sufficient time new species emerged, and given even longer time he concluded, ’I believe animals are descended from at most four or five progenitors, and plants an equal or less number’. He did not accept any sort of power or Deity as involved in this process. Much of his book is actually defending his theory against attacks. He admits he lacked evidence of transition species, like a giraffe with a neck half as long. Darwin believed ‘missing links’ would one day be found in the fossil record. His hope was not well founded because almost two hundred years later, with over one hundred thousand fossils documented, there are no missing links. Our Reformed fathers were not to know this of course, but they might have questioned the vast ages demanded by Darwin’s theory.

Darwin used the word ‘species’ in the title of his book but he made no clear distinction between species and varieties. He makes no mention of ‘kind’ as repeatedly stated in Genesis 1- God created X ‘according to its kind’. He admitted that crossing species led to sterile hybrids but dismissed this as a result of faulty reproductive systems. Darwin knew nothing about Mendellian genetics; he accepted Lamarck’s ideas in proposing transmutation of species. Again our forefathers might have questioned the fact of hybrid sterility. To be sure, not all of the men we will refer to accepted transmutation of species and the evolution of man.

Charles Lyell’s book, entitled ‘Principles of geology- an attempt to explain former changes of the earth’s surface by reference to causes now in operation’ was published in 1830. Adopting a theory of *uniformitarianism* (originally proposed by James Hutton), he proposed a geologic timescale going back millions of years, in direct defiance of the Biblical record. Lyell coined the terms Paleozoic, Mesozoic and Cenozoic, supposedly going back c.500 million years. We note that the idea of ‘the present being the key to the past’ takes such study outside the realm of operational science.

Darwin and Lyell corresponded, developing their theories in the light of each other’s. David Livingstone dismisses the idea that ‘evolution is uniformitarianism applied to biology’ but Darwin’s theory has no credibility at all apart from the long ages as proposed by Lyell. Radiometric dating was used to date rocks as millions of years old but this involved many assumptions, one being uniformitarianism. Using Darwin’s theory, rocks could be dated from the fossils they contained- biostratigraphy. So Lyell and Darwin worked in tandem to promote the idea of a vast age for the earth and for life on the earth. The catastrophic biblical flood had no place in their theories- hence *uniformitarianism* as against *catastrophism*.

**Chalmers and the gap theory**

Dr Thomas Chalmers is known to us as the father of the Free Church of Scotland, having led in the so-called Disruption in 1843. A leading evangelical theologian, Chalmers was also interested in natural theology and science. Within the intellectual community of the day Lyell’s new theory was gaining popularity, and sections of the Christian community were ready to abandon a literal worldwide flood. Douglas Kelly writes that ‘in the early 19th century, under pressure from the intellectual community which claimed irrefutable proof for vast ages of the world as well as the existence of fossils much older than biblical Adam, Dr Chalmers proposed inserting a gap of millions of years between the first two verses of Genesis to accommodate these aeons of earth history with their fossils into the traditional biblical story of beginnings’. Jonathan Sarfati writes more generally of ‘conservative biblical exegetes being intimidated by science’.

Chalmers published his idea in 1814. His standing within the evangelical community meant that what became known as the ‘gap theory’, or ‘ruin-reconstruction theory’, became popular by way of compromise between the Bible and science. The popular Schofield Reference Bible of 1909 incorporated this theory into the footnotes. The six days of creation remained as 24 hour solar days at this stage but millions of years could be inserted between the first two verses of Genesis 1. The original Hebrew, however, does not really allow such a gap in the reading, although the KJV begins verse 2, ‘And the earth was without form and void’ when ‘and’ is not in the Hebrew- it is not a *waw*-consecutive; and it certainly cannot be translated ‘now’ or ‘because’. Noel Weeks calls the translation ‘the earth *became* waste and void’ a ‘grammatically impossible translation’ of Genesis 1:2. A straightforward reading of the text, a reading undertaken up until this point in time, saw no ‘gap’ between these verses, certainly not one of millions of years.

Chalmers died in 1847 so was not aware of Darwin’s theory; would he have accepted proto-humans existing before Adam, or life of any form before divine creation? The name ‘ruin-reconstruction theory’ of course, proposes life and death before Adam; Genesis 1:2 becomes a re-creation after divine judgment upon Satan. The fossil record of the death and extinction of many species is placed in this gap. This means there was death before the sin of Adam. But in Romans 5:12 we read that through one man sin entered the world and death through sin. Further on Paul writes of the whole creation subjected to futility and groaning (Rom 8:20, 22).

The popularity of this gap theory extended till recent times. In his book, ‘Understanding the Bible’ (1972) John Stott wrote, ‘evolution may have been the mode which God employed in creating’ – what is called ‘theistic evolution’. He wrote, ‘But my acceptance of Adam and Eve as historical is not incompatible with my belief that several forms of pre-Adamic ‘hominid’ may have existed for thousands of years previously… it is conceivable that God created Adam out of one of them’. This was the door opened by Chalmers theory. Many accepted Darwin’s idea that man descended from the apes with the proviso that his conscience or soul was given by God. Thankfully, Reformed men like Schaeffer and Lloyd-Jones did not accept such ideas, but many did.

**Scotland and liberal theology**

What was the situation in the Free Church of Scotland when Darwin’s book hit the shelves? Chalmers theory was still popular but it was also the time when liberal theology arrived from Germany. Liberalism elevated rationalism about revelation; the Bible was no longer regarded as the inspired and inerrant word of God. To some in the church Darwin’s theory of evolution was more rational than the biblical account of creation. Liberal ideas lead to the questioning of Confessional standards, and to the prolonged heresy trial and final expulsion of William Robertson Smith in 1881. Robert Rainy initially supported Robertson Smith but in the end changed sides. Even so, Rainy was an advocate of relaxation in terms of subscription to the WCF and the adoption of declaratory legislation- this was in the lead up to church union in 1900.

In 1874 Rainy was made principal of New College, Edinburgh. I mention Rainy because the historian David Livingstone holds him up as a leading Scottish Calvinist who accepted the theory of evolution. In his inaugural lecture Rainy said that evolution was going on before our eyes and that Darwin’s theory of the origin of man was irrelevant to theology. Prior to this, Free Church elders had strongly opposed Darwin’s theory, particularly when Huxley, in an 1862 lecture on evolution, attacked the biblical account of creation.

**Princeton and B.B. Warfield**

Across the Atlantic in the halls of Princeton College the winds of liberalism were also blowing. Charles Hodge visited Germany in 1926 but returned rejecting rationalism and ‘higher criticism’. He also rejected Darwinism as being theory not fact, and seeing its underlying atheism and rejection of teleology or doctrine of final causes. Yet ‘in the 1870’s he suggested the term ‘day’ could be understood as referring to great geological epochs’ (Livingstone). B.B. Warfield came from a farm; his father was a breeder of cattle. As a young man he was keen on science and studied Darwin’s book. Warfield, who was taught by Hodge, was also ready to accept the long ages required by evolution, pointing to gaps in biblical genealogies. He also went further in accepting some form of evolution. In 1888 Warfield wrote, ‘there is no necessary antagonism between Christianity and evolution, provided that we do not hold too extreme a form of evolution’; that is a form that rejects God and miraculous intervention (in the giving of the soul and in creating Eve). Warfield saw divine activity in creation, evolution and mediate creation. By mediate creation he did not mean ‘theistic evolution’ as such but forming something by combination of creation and a process (i.e. evolution) working together. For example, Adam’s body could be formed by a long process of evolution but his spirit was given by divine in-breathing.

While Warfield may have left the matter of evolution an open question in 1888, Fred Fargel does not necessarily agree with Livingstone who wrote that Warfield increasingly accepted evolutionary theory over the years. Even so, Warfield was seeking compromise between biblical inerrancy and an orthodox hermeneutic, and science, so-called. While Warfield was straining to accommodate Darwin’s theory, Livingstone is straining to present this orthodox biblical scholar as an evolutionist. Livingstone is critical of the unintellectual arguments of creationists. The American Presbyterian Church in commenting on Livingstone’s attempts to represent the theory of evolution as acceptable to biblical Christians writes, ‘This fact alone should be enough to tell 21st century Biblical Christians, who have the benefit of hindsight showing where a century of evolutionary thought has taken our culture, just how problematic Warfield’s thinking was on this subject’.

One thing Warfield noted was the continuing scepticism towards Darwin’s theory in the scientific community. Discerning scientists saw the ongoing lack of evidence to support this theory. Missing links were not being found among the fossils. In 1986 Michael Denton, not a professing Christian, published, ‘Evolution: a theory in crisis’. He writes of this theory, ‘After a century of intensive effort biologists have failed to validate it in any significant sense’. This does not point to a return to the biblical account of creation by scientists but it should encourage Christians to return to the Bible and cease compromising with scientific theory. Men like Richard Dawkins tenaciously cling to the theory of evolution not because of his science but because of his atheism. By the mid-20th century Christian scientists were re-evaluating the fossils, the facts, and fitting them to a different framework. By 1976 Henry Morris was ready to publish his work in ‘the Genesis Record’. He showed that the fossil record was consistent with a global catastrophe like Noah’s flood, i.e. fossils of all kinds within a single layer of rock.

**Day-age theories**

Biblical scholars, particularly those who had adopted liberal theology, but also evangelicals like John Stott, had abandoned the idea of a worldwide flood since: ‘the flood seems to have been a comparatively local disaster’ (Stott). Nigel Cameron in, ‘Evolution and the authority of the Bible’ concluded that ‘every single commentator’ in the 19th century, bar one, ‘argues against the traditional idea of the flood’. The 20th century saw little change. These scholars also abandoned reading the early chapters of Genesis as historical narrative. Ancient Near Eastern texts like ‘Enuma Elish’ were being compared to the biblical account of creation and the flood. Some, like a recent archbishop of Sydney, taught me that the early chapters of Genesis were a bit like the Book of Revelation meaning they were full of symbolism. In such a reading of Genesis, one can accept the ‘day-age theory’ popularised by Hugh Ross, and the ‘framework hypothesis’ advocated by Meredith Kline. One wonders why such theories were necessary when Darwin’s theory of evolution was on the decline, but the theory of long geological ages has not declined in popularity. Millions or billions of years of the earth history continue to be taught and believed without question.

As previously stated, a vast age for the earth is essential for Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the origin of the species. Chalmer’s gap theory allowed such an age to be read into the Bible. Reading the days of Genesis 1 as long ages also gives place in the Bible for Darwin’s theory, not that exegetes were necessarily attempting such compromise; although this was certainly the case at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. We have noted that Hodge and Warfield departed from a reading of solar days in Genesis 1. They firstly abandoned the biblical genealogies, like that in Matthew 1, as having a purpose other than providing a chronology, but as the American Presbyterian Church comments, ‘it is quite another matter to say they have no chronological purpose at all’. Why do we read all the ‘begats’ and the years in Genesis if they have no chronological purpose? Clearly, stalwarts of Reformed theology were trying to accommodate evolutionary theory.

With every day of the six days of creation we read ‘so the morning and evening of the X day’. But Hugh Ross and others point to the absence of this formula with the seventh day, the Sabbath rest. He argues that the seventh day represents a minimum of several thousand years. Ross admits, ‘I see the community of scientists, including astronomers and astrophysicists, as an *ethnos*, (as in a group to be witnessed to)’. He then says of the dogmas of a few-thousand-years- old earth, ‘I cannot imagine a notion more offensive to this group’ (in Kelly).

Oxford professor James Barr, who rejected any notion of supernatural Christianity or biblical inerrancy, wrote in 1984 “the apologetic arguments which suppose the ‘days’ of creation to be long eras of time, the figures of years not being chronological, and the flood to be a mere local Mesopotamian flood, are not taken seriously by any professor, as far I know’ (quoted by Kelly). Kelly writes, ‘a large percentage of conservative evangelical scholars refuse to interpret the Genesis text in its plain historical and literal sense in order to accommodate it to the premise of the reigning world view concerning origins’.

In conclusion, we must refrain from being mesmerised or intimidated by unproven theories or declarations by scientists. Such theories continue to be thrown at us today with statements like, ‘99 percent of scientists believe it’. If it is a proven scientific fact we will not hear such words. If it is proven scientific fact it will not contradict our plain reading of the Bible. Let us have such confidence in the word of God.

Finally a small story. In India I had to register with the local police every year to get a residential permit which allowed me to stay in India. I was there as a Christian, teaching in Christian college. For some years I went to the office with fear and trepidation. But then I realised that the intelligence officer knew perfectly well I was a missionary, so why try to hide the fact? So I took a Scripture tract and gave it to him! The world expects us as believers to know the Bible and to believe the Bible. Let us do what they expect us to do, and what the Lord expects us to do (Rom 1:16).

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